

Success Begins on the Floor

By C. Richard Panico

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Arguably, we have made some great strides in manufacturing over the last two decades. The charge has been, optimize or die. We have applied technology better and smarter than ever. We have taken long known and discussed approaches, like six sigma, lean manufacturing, critical chain, and others and have learned to employ them with great results.

A quick search on the Internet will yield more information on ways to improve manufacturing and other supply chain elements than you could read in a lifetime. However, what has truly amazed me is how little focus and attention has been applied to one element of manufacturing that was in the beginning, is now, and will forever be what I happen to consider critically important: the first line supervisor. This is the person who has the most direct influence on one of the company's most important assets, its production personnel: material handlers, operators, maintenance personnel, utility workers, and others.

I have witnessed manufacturing operations that, despite aged process equipment and marginally efficient work flows, continually outpace competitors in throughput, quality, safety, and consistency. Rarely do re-engineered processes alone deliver to their full potential without the disciplined application effected through human beings. On a manufacturing floor these resources are mostly driven to action and inspired, or underutilized and demoralized, by the first line supervisor.

I believe most would accept the notion that the positive human spirit is difficult to defeat and can accomplish some pretty amazing feats, whether in competitive

sports or on the manufacturing floor. As it relates to our subject at hand, it seems as though less and less attention is being placed upon the advantages that can be realized by properly developing and deploying human assets.

R-E-S-P-E-C-T

I recently visited a glass manufacturing company that is located in the heart of Chicago. The company would be considered small to mid-sized and is several generations old. This industry, like many others, has felt the pressure of third world competition.

Unlike many of its larger competitors, its equipment is old and the plant, by industrial engineering standards, would be considered crowded. I should also mention that the company's manufacturing workforce is comprised primarily of immigrants with little formal education. Nonetheless, year after year this company continues to grow, generating greater volume at lower cost. The quality consistency of its products is viewed by many as an industry standard.

In assessing the reasons for this company's continued success, I attribute it to a few factors: people on the factory floor are involved, respected, and appreciated. The first line supervisor continually challenges them to develop ways to improve the process and lower costs while maintaining their high quality producer status. In return, everyone shares in the rewards through bonus programs and good benefits. It doesn't take long for any visitor with a reasonably good understanding of manufacturing to observe the positive dynamics at work between this supervisor and the production personnel.

I am not intending to imply that technology and modern approaches to optimizing manufacturing are not important, quite the contrary; however, these are elements that can be readily replicated by competitors. What cannot be easily and quickly duplicated is the positive culture that fuels innovation, continuous improvement, responsibility, accountability, teamwork, and pride of workmanship. These attributes belong to environments that continue to place a priority on finding and hiring those unique individuals who have an exceptional blend of technical aptitude, general business knowledge, extraordinarily strong interpersonal skills, an ability and desire to manage the challenges and stress associated with the dynamics of day to day manufacturing and, last but not least, extraordinary work ethic.

It is surprising to me how many companies sell the position short. The only reason that I can attribute to this oversight is a lack of understanding of the role and its impact on safety, productivity, quality, labor relations, and continuous improvement. I can only surmise that those making the hiring decisions either don't understand the role or are compromising the process employed to find these remarkable leaders.

BUILDING A LEADER

For companies in the business of manufacturing a product and intent on creating a strong pool of leaders to move up the ranks, there is no better platform for demonstrating leadership capabilities than in a first line supervisory role. Unfortunately, not enough companies take advantage of this proving ground. However, research has proven that the premier companies have a reputation for developing their future operations leaders through this role.

After graduating from college, I was recruited by Johnson & Johnson (J&J). My first role was as a maintenance supervisor for a large consumer products manufacturing plant in Chicago. Believe me, I learned very quickly what it means to lead people. At the same time, I was able to observe many other very intelligent, good people fail miserably for lack of one or many of those elusive leadership skills. I can honestly say that my

experience as a first line supervisor set the tone and prepared me for future managerial roles of increased responsibility up to my present day role as president and CEO. The single most influential role in my development was first line supervision.

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My tour of duty as a line supervisor was undoubtedly one of the most challenging and rewarding. I recognized just how impactful inspiring leadership can be in the toughest of environments. I also learned that many of the classical excuses for poor manufacturing performance - tough union environment, incompetent workers, lack of upper management support - certainly were hindrances, but for those who understood and practiced leadership, these were challenges that only made the victory of positive change even sweeter. To this day, after having viewed many companies of all sizes as a consultant, I still see a common thread among the manufacturing leaders, including J&J. Many operations executives share a common experience: they served as first line supervisors.

It is critically important that we continue to apply technology and new approaches that can improve the utilization of our manufacturing assets, lower costs, and assure quality. However, if the latest technology and most innovative approaches are not melded with motivated, conscientious people, a key competitive opportunity is being neglected. Technology doesn't change attitudes, leaders do. The line supervisor, more than anyone else within the management ranks, holds the key to unleashing and growing the potential that resides on every manufacturing floor in the world. ■ **GCI**

C. RICHARD PANICO is president of Integrated Project Management Company, Inc., a professional project management firm in Burr Ridge, Illinois. IPM plans and leads execution on client objectives, helping companies meet them faster and more effectively. mfgex@allured.com